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ABSTRACT

The relationship between a student's "significant others" and academic persistence or attrition was studied at Spring Arbor College, Michigan, and activities were instituted at the college as a result of study findings. "Significant others" was defined as those who interacted with and influenced the individual's conceptions. A modified form of the Wisconsin Significant Other Battery (Haller and Woelfel, 1972) was administered to 181 of the 279 new 1974 freshmen. Fifty-four percent of the respondents indicated that they had at least one significant other affiliated with the college (student, faculty, staff); 46 percent had none. The average number of significant others for each student was 3.7. Of the 54 respondents who left the college during or at the end of their freshman year, 75 percent had no significant others on campus, while 63 percent of the 137 respondents who persisted into their sophomore year had at least one significant other at the college. Based on these findings, a program incorporating the significant others model was developed. All on-campus activities were reviewed in respect to their facilitation of significant other relationships for the student. Faculty were asked to provide additional time and attention outside the classroom to a few students. Since parents are significant others for many students, they were included in the summer orientation weekend and freshman parents day. Finally, extracurricular activities and admissions were redesigned. (SW)

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SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: A New Look at Attrition

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Attrition in higher education is not a new problem. Knowingly or unknowingly, it has been a statistical dimension of colleges and universities ever since the first student matriculated to a college campus. It has gained a position of prominence in recent years, however, because the loss of students is now critically linked to the issue of survival for most colleges and universities.

The problem of attrition whatever form it takes, is important to colleges and universities for several reasons. First, it costs the college financially. The cost comes in two forms: a) in direct dollars through loss of revenue (tuition income, housing, fees, etc.) by loss of students; and b) in its impact on the long range program by maintaining constantly low enrollments in upperclassmen courses which fix high dollars amounts for instructional costs at this level.

A second reason is that attrition breaks down the student continuity and level of maturity in the student body. This has a particular impact on the small college. As attrition takes its toll, there continues a large population of underclassmen every year as compared to a continued small population of upperclassmen. This student mix many times impedes the continuity and stability of a student body and militates against a maturing peer influence.

A final important consideration of attrition to an institution is the impact it has on the student who leaves. Often students leave with feelings of disappointment, disillusionment and resentment toward the school.

These feelings not only affect the student and his or her self-concept, but also color the influence the individual may have on others regarding the institution.

Programs aimed at retaining those "disappearing" students have accomplished almost everything but successful retention. As Astin (1975) indicates, dropping out of college has been intensely researched, but the research has not clearly revealed which specific factors influence students to leave, which specific factors convince students to remain enrolled, or how these factors might be controlled by those with a vested interest in persuading the student not to leave. While ultimate solutions appear at this time out of the question, it does seem likely that limited insight into the college attrition phenomenon is possible. This project was an attempt to respond to that hypothesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An ever increasing body of literature is available regarding the issue of attrition or dropping out of college. Cope (1968) indicated that the literature agrees in general at three major points: 1) The average rate of attrition nationally over a four year career is relatively constant. Despite some questions about reliability and interpretation of gross national figures, most authorities continue to agree that 40 percent of the entering students never achieve a baccalaureate degree, while an additional 20 percent do not graduate on schedule. 2) The greatest proportion of attrition occurs during the freshman year of college. 3) The attrition rate is generally higher at state supported institutions than at private

institutions. Beyond these broad guidelines, very little of the research to date supports or confirms findings of previous researchers, nor are consistent specific factors which influence attrition readily identified.

A serious flaw in the literature on attrition has been the failure by researchers to develop a theoretical or conceptual perspective to the problem. Relatively few genuine efforts have been made to raise the understanding of "dropping out" to a level of abstraction where theory might intersect and play a role in guiding the research. Most of the work occurs at an operational level. For example, studies by Astin, 1964, 1972; Iffert, 1957, Knoell, 1966; McNelley, 1938; Summerskill, 1962 simply summarize patterns of persistence and withdrawal. Although they provide a valuable data base and help to determine the extent of the problem, they fail to tap the complex reasons and motivations for leaving college. At best, these approaches tend to be descriptive and often rely upon statistical analysis alone as an avenue for exploring the problem. Few national studies have penetrated the demographic level to explore the social and psychological influences of dropping out.

Others (Alfred, 1973; Asting 1975a, 1975b; Bayer, 1968; Blanchfield, 1971; Cope, 1972; Hannah, 1971; Ikenberry, 1961; Johnson, 1970; Nelson, 1966; Noel, 1975; Waller, 1964) have tried to identify patterns of attrition and correlate these to personality traits or characteristics of the students, environmental influences of the institution, or a combination of both. Their results have been quite varied and often conflicting. Most recent and notable of these efforts has been Astin's work Preventing Students From Dropping Out. Based on his longitudinal and multi-institutional study involving approximately 101,000 students from 1968 through 1972, he concludes that there are several key variables in students

persisting or withdrawing from college. He asserts that the greatest predictive factor is the student's past academic record and academic ability. Next in significance are the student's degree aspirations, religious background and preference, college finances, study habits, and the educational attainment of the parents.

Based on these findings, many of his recommendations are similar to those of previous researchers (e.g., more selective admission procedures, upgrading student's academic performance, and promoting financial assistance). These recommendations have had a tendency to be all too obvious. They prove to be of little value to institutions who, because of economic and other reasons, cannot make substantial changes in their present policies regarding admissions standards, academic procedures and financial aid.

Astin makes some other assertions however, which support the hypothesis of this project. He finds, for example, that participation in extracurricular activities, especially membership in social fraternities and sororities, is significantly related to staying in college. In addition, maintaining on-campus residence, having an on-campus job, and attending an institution in which the social backgrounds of other students resembles the student's own social background enhances a student's persistence. These support the theory, he argues, that student persistence depends upon the degree of personal involvement in campus life.

Of particular interest to this study were the findings of Dr. Lee Noel, of the American College Testing Program. Noel compiled an annotated bibliography of the doctoral dissertations on attrition-related subjects published between January 1970 and March 1975. In all, 65 dissertations studying specific institutions or groups of institutions were abstracted.

Noel concluded from these studies that students drop out for four complex reasons (or more likely, a combination of reasons):

- 1) Isolation (loneliness, depression)
- 2) Dissonance (incompatibility with environment, curriculum, people)
- 3) Boredom
- 4) Financial difficulties/pressures

The significance of this research to this project is that the primary factors Noel discovered relate heavily to interpersonal or social dissatisfaction.

A final series of studies worth considerable attention are those of Haller and Woelfel. Directing their attention toward assessing interpersonal influence on certain life orientation variables of students, their research has unusual potential for the study of attrition. The researchers attempted to clarify and bring into a measurable domain the social psychological concept of "significant others" (Haller, Woelfel, and Fink, 1969; Haller and Woelfel, 1972; Woelfel, 1968). Conceived by Harry Stack Sullivan in the early 1940's, the concept essentially referred to those clusters of individuals, surrounding a person, who exert significant influence upon that person and his or her orientation toward life. An important distinction to be noted is that the significant other provides a "segmentalized" view of interpersonal influence. That is, a given individual can have different significant others for different issues in his or her life.

Wanting to determine the relationship between "significant others" and an individual's orientation toward certain life variables, they designed the Wisconsin Significant Other Battery (Haller, Woelfel, and Fink, 1969; Woelfel, 1968) as an instrument to identify "significant others" and to assess such significant others' influence on students' vocational and

educational aspirations. Their findings impressively supported the contention that "the significant other is a precise and significant concept for use in assessing interpersonal influence on orientation variables" (abstract, 1972). Their research, also suggests that the concepts and instruments used have high utility for a variety of orientation variables.

The "significant other" approach is a particularly attractive alternative in attacking the problem of attrition for two reasons. One is that it is built upon a theoretical base. Hence, it goes beyond previous research on attrition which has little to no theoretical or conceptual framework. Moreover, the "significant other" approach provides an opportunity for generalization and utility at a theoretical level unavailable to descriptive studies.

The other reason that it is attractive is that it can be used as both a theory of prediction, and a theory of influence. At best, most of the present attrition research can only be used sparingly as a predictive tool. The "significant other" model on the other hand, not only has potential for predicting students who are most likely to drop out, but can also provide an immediate conceptual framework for creating preventative attrition programs.

THE PROJECT

An extensive statistical analysis of attrition/retention data was completed in the spring semester 1974 at Spring Arbor College. It was the culmination of a five-year research project on attrition (Kline, 1974). The subsequent report provided a wealth of useful statistics and did much

to establish the exact dimensions of the college's attrition problem. However, it failed to conclusively identify factors which could be used to predict student attrition.

Using the "significant other" model, a new project was begun. The purpose of the project was to examine the correlation or relationship between a student's "significant others" (SO) and his or her staying in or leaving college. The following hypotheses were developed:

- 1) Students will have a propensity to drop out of Spring Arbor College if they have no significant others affiliated with the college.
- 2) Students will have a propensity to remain at Spring Arbor College if they have at least one significant other affiliated with the college.
- 3) The Significant Other Survey is a useful instrument in identifying students who are most likely to leave Spring Arbor College.

For the purpose of this project the theoretical construct "significant others" was defined as one who influences an individual's conceptions through either interaction (definer) with the individual or by example (Haller and Woelfel, 1972).

INSTRUMENT: The instrument developed for the study was a modified form of the Wisconsin Significant Other Battery used by Haller and Woelfel (1972). The intent was to rely upon the validity and reliability established for their instrument. Although a complete instrument was administered which provided information regarding both types of "significant others" (definers and models), operationally the research limited itself to those responses which provided information regarding significant others as definers. Thus, the term significant others as discussed in the project, refers only to those persons who were definers (Haller and Woelfel, 1972) in a student's life. The purpose of this instrument was to identify the significant others for entering freshman in respect to their selection of a college.

The questions of greatest concern on the survey were: "Who have you talked with most often about your attending Spring Arbor College?" and "How often have you talked with the above people?" These questions identified specifically, significant others for students in regard to college selection and the extent of their influence. Spaces were provided for six responses to each question, with instructions that more could be added if appropriate.

SAMPLE: The 1974 freshman class was the selected population. The primary reason for selecting the freshman class population was that it is during the freshmen year when the highest rate of attrition occurs at Spring Arbor College, 34.6 percent (Kline, 1974). To work the project through to an effective conclusion with this particular sample would be to tackle the problem at its most intense state. It also would maximize the benefits, if the project was successful. Out of a population of 279 freshmen, 181 students participated in the project. Efforts were made to see if the 181 participants, through a self-selective process, had potentially biased the sample and thus not reflected the total population. Demographic characteristics considered significant in national attrition studies were reviewed for both those who participated and those who did not. In examining such areas as sex, race, religious background, marital status, regional background, and academic achievement, no significant difference was established between participants and non-participants.

PROCEDURES: All new freshman students were requested to be at a required evening assembly the second week in October. At the assembly, participants were asked to respond to the Significant Other Battery. Instructions were

provided as a part of the battery and also given verbally. Students turned in their completed surveys upon leaving the auditorium. Collected were 162 surveys. In an attempt to gain a response from a larger percentage of the class, surveys were mailed to all freshman not at the assembly. An additional 19 surveys were received in this manner.

After the surveys were collected, responses to four specific questions were analyzed and classified. Working with the specific question, "Who have you talked with most often about your attending Spring Arbor College?"; those students who identified as a significant other at least one member in the college community (other students, faculty, or staff) were differentiated from those who identified significant others not affiliated with the college. A second item was the establishment of a priority ranking of influence or significant for the significant others identified by the question, "How often have you talked with the above people?" Thirdly, responses to the question, "Where did your parents want you to attend college?" were grouped in two categories--a) those identifying Spring Arbor College as the parent's choice, and b) those identifying an institution other than the college or gave no response. A final response tabulated was in regards to the person they thought felt the same way they did about Spring Arbor College.

RESULTS: Of the 181 students participating in the project, 97 of them (54%) indicated they had at least one significant other affiliated with the college (student, faculty, staff). Eighty-four of them (46%) identified no significant others affiliated with the college. The average number of significant others for each student was 3.7. In determining the priority ranking of significant others, the three individuals the student

consulted most often were selected in order of most frequent consultation. When frequency of consultation was the same for two or more significant others, the individual identified first by the student was given priority.

Forty-four students who had taken the Significant Other Survey left Spring Arbor College during or at the end of their freshmen year. Thirty-three (75%) of these students indicated on their survey that they had no significant others on campus. Of those freshmen who persisted into their sophomore year, surveys had been completed by 137 students. Eight-six (63%) of these students indicated on their survey that they had at least one significant other affiliated with the college.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS: Recognizing the severe limitations of the project for generalization, the results of the study did prove significant for Spring Arbor College. Several conclusions can be drawn about the sample population. A strong relationship did seem to exist between freshmen students' significant others and their propensity to leave or stay at the college. This was demonstrated by the fact that 75 percent of the sampled students who failed to persist for more than one year, indicated on the survey that their significant others were persons not affiliated with the college. This figure becomes even more significant when further investigation is conducted on those who dropped out. Two of the eleven students who indicated they had significant others on campus, but left the College, had their number one significant other also leave either prior to their leaving or at the same time. A third student who related on his survey that his parents were in strong disagreement with his choice of Spring Arbor as a college, did not return as a result of parental insistence. This information was received in writing at the beginning of

the 1975 fall semester. Seven out of the eleven students had only one significant other on campus and for three of these, their only significant other on campus was ranked third in influence.

A second conclusion that can be drawn is that those freshman students who identified as significant others person affiliated with the college had a propensity to remain at the college. The statistical support for this seems slightly inconclusive when only 64% of the students who returned indicated in the survey that they had a significant other on campus. However, this percentage was deceptively low because it included three types of students confounding the percentage, who indicated on their survey they did not have a significant other on campus. One was the student who had developed a significant other after the instrument was administered. This student actually should be included in those who had significant others on campus as a result of developing a significant other during the freshmen year. A second type of student is one who still does not have a significant other on campus, will not develop one, and may well be reflected in future attrition statistics in the sophomore, junior, or senior years. A third type of student who does not have a significant other on campus, but remains, is the student who is being supported and encouraged to stay on at the college by significant others external to the college.

A final conclusion is that the Significant Other Survey was a useful instrument for identifying those freshman in the sample population who were most likely to leave Spring Arbor College. In showing that 3 out of every 4 students in the sample who left the college had indicated in October they had no significant others on campus, the survey identified with 75 percent

accuracy those students most likely to leave the college. Along with the accuracy of identification, the instrument is useful in that it can identify students who are most likely to leave the college early in the semester (within one month of the freshman's matriculation to campus). This gives the institution a distinct advantage in providing a longer opportunity to work specifically with those freshman who are most likely to drop out. A final point is that the identification of significant others proved to be a far more significant factor relating to attrition than any other demographic factors that could be identified.

It is not suggested that a cause and effect relationship can be established between significant others and attrition. However, it does seem reasonable to assert that the project has demonstrated that a relationship does exist between significant others and attrition for the sample population investigated.

Two of the studies cited earlier (Astin 1975b, Noel 1975) appear to lend support to this contention that significant others are a considerable factor in attrition. Astin's findings on personal involvement in campus life, membership in fraternities and sororities, and participation in extracurricular activities lend themselves to the Significant Other Model. Participation, involvement, and membership find their greatest value in relating people to one another in a significant way; thus, fostering significant other relationship.

Noel's (1975) conclusions that isolation, dissonance and boredom were critical factors in attrition also seem to relate to the concept of significant others. A student's ability to establish significant other relationships on campus would very much affect his or her feelings of isolation, boredom, and dissonance. If he or she were unable to develop

these relationships, logic dictates that the person's sense of isolation or estrangement and dissonance would increase. Feelings of both academic and social boredom would also be affected by a lack of close, significant relationships to others.

There may indeed be other variables that affect attrition. Yet, none seemed as powerful as the significant other for freshman students at Spring Arbor College. The effort of examining interpersonal relationships and their impact upon attrition appears to be the first real thrust of this approach in attrition/retention research.

APPLICATION

The purpose of the project was not only to identify significant factors which relate to attrition but to also institute a program geared to reducing attrition. Convinced that the concept of "significant other" was a powerful and workable tool in dealing with the problem of attrition at Spring Arbor College, a program was formulated around this conceptual model. Just a few dimensions of the program will be highlighted in this application; specifically those which relate to changes in the on-campus and admissions activities.

ON-CAMPUS ACTIVITIES

All on-campus activities were reviewed in respect to their ability to facilitate or maintain significant other relationships for the student. In general, instructional staff were reminded and encouraged to establish good personal relationships with their students where possible. It was

suggested that they select a few students in their field to whom they would give additional time and attention outside the classroom.

Students identified in the survey who did not have significant others affiliated with the college were given extra exposure to selected people on campus such as student resident assistants and academic advisors.

The freshman orientation and academic advising program was restructured. Orientation previously could have been adequately described as a "show and tell" operation in the fall. In light of Hannah's studies (1971) which indicate many students have thoughts of withdrawing before even entering college, the bulk of orientation was moved to the summer. Combining this with the knowledge that for 60% of students parents remain "significant others" in student selection of a college parents were included in the summer orientation weekend. The emphasis of the weekend was threefold: 1) to plan the student's schedule for the fall and thus tie the student into the program early; 2) to run an initial Significant Other Battery on the freshman class to receive an early perception of potential problems, and 3) to develop significant relationships among all who were at the weekend. Both students and parents were placed in small groups (parents separate from students) for the majority of the weekend with activities centered around getting to know one another. In this context, positive information regarding the college was disseminated. The fall orientation then was a carry-over of this activity for the students. Academic advising, information dissemination, and registration were conducted in these established groups. The obvious intent was to provide an initial primary reference group experience for the student.

A Freshman Parents Day was developed for the first Saturday of November and the last Saturday in the spring. Freshman parents were invited back to the college at the college's expense during these times. Recognizing again the impact of the parents as a generalized significant other an effort was made to develop a low profile public relations program that, if effective, would be using the parents as support mechanisms external to the campus to encourage their students to remain at the college. The key to the day was the grouping of the parents. Utilizing the data collected on the significant other survey, parents were grouped according to whether or not they had encouraged their children to attend or not attend Spring Arbor College. Each group had at least three sets of parents who encouraged their students to attend Spring Arbor. This grouping enhanced the potential that the discussion and orientation of the group would be proactive toward Spring Arbor and that the principle of public advocacy would have a reinforcing affect on those parents supporting the college.

Extra Curricular Activities were redesigned. The social activities program was redesigned to be as conducive as possible to the development of significant others.

Clubs and organizations were not predetermined, but created around the interests of small groups of students. Broader involvement in the athletic program was designed both intramurally and intercollegiately. The intramural program was established around living units to reinforce the interaction and relationships already occurring at the residence level. Interestingly enough, an enlargement of the women's athletic programs was supported on the basis of this model.

ADMISSIONS:

Non-traditional suggestions were offered to admissions as to the role they played in attrition/retention. Working again mainly with the theories of public advocacy and significant others, a five-point proposal was recommended:

1) Utilize freshmen in recruitment efforts. After selecting key freshman (i.e. those whom were identified more than twice in response to the question on the (SO) survey, "Who feels most like you regarding Spring Arbor College?") send three member teams for recruiting, two who had significant others on campus, with one whose significant others were not on campus.

2) Widely incorporate block recruiting. That is, recruit from places from which several students are already attending the college or are planning on attending. This is preferred to recruiting in new territory as the former situation may cause students to be bringing their significant others with them.

3) Establish recruitment activities in the homes of present freshmen, whose parents advocated Spring Arbor College. Hopefully have them co-host the activity with freshmen parents who did not advocate the college.

4) Place a significant other question on the admissions application for the admissions office to follow up. This follow-up would be in two dimensions:

- a) A thank you letter to significant other for their input into the potential student's life, plus a 3 x 5 card saying:
"_____ says you are a significant person in (his or her) life, how can we best help (him or her) accomplish (his or her) goals?"
- b) Send occasionally to the significant others information emphasizing the positive attributes of the college.

Further activities built around the Significant Other Model are continuing to be developed. The above project has already proved fruitful in several ways. First, it has raised the consciousness of the entire college community regarding the impact of interpersonal relationships upon students staying or leaving the college. Second, even though the project

has only been partially implemented, the attrition rate during the past year declined nearly 6%. Although other factors may have influenced this reduction, this project is the only new variable of sizable dimensions that was introduced into the life of the college.

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